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OLD CHINESE LACQUERS

on view

November 10th. to December 12th.

1913/

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OLD CHINESE LACQUERS ON VIEW NOVEMBER
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The use of lacquer by the Chinese as a decorative medium is undoubtedly one of the oldest, if not the oldest, applied medium that they employed. The use of it for ornamental purposes can be traced by documentary evidence for many centuries, and even as far back as the Sung Dynasty, which commenced 960 A.D. we read of articles for the imperial use as being made of lacquer. If we could go back far enough, we should probably find that its inception was more utilitarian than artistic, as it formed an easy method of rendering thin wooden vessels waterproof. In the "Ko ku yao lun" a learned work on antiquities published at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty in 1387 A.D. we find the following interesting note on the subject, the author, Tsao Chao saying as follows :- "Cups and other articles of carved red lacquer are not classed as old and new, but distinguished according to the depth of the cinnabar coating, the bright tone of the red, the fine polish and solidity of the lacquer. The heaviest are the best." Again in the "Ching pi tsang" (Collection of artistic rarities) we find a further interesting statement; "In our own Ming Dynasty the carved lacquer not only excelled in the cinnabar colouring and in the finished technique of the body, but also in the literary style of the inscriptions inscribed beneath the pieces." The writer goes on to state that from about 1426 to 1435 A.D. the inscription was "engraved with a knife and filled in in gold." This manner of inscribing appears to have been adopted permanently, as we have in this exhibition specimens ranging in date from that on an octagonal jardiniere of the Chia Ching Period (1522 to 1566 A.D.) and continuing in an unbroken line to those of the Kien Lung Period (C. 1750) the last and culminat-

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ing point of Chinese lacquer. The above mentioned jardiniere is a remarkable specimen of the three-colour Ming lacquer, the whole surface being closely covered with flying cranes. We have also several fine boxes, which, although not dated, we have no hesitation in ascribing to the Ming Period largely on account of there being made of a duller, darker red lacquer than is usually employed in later times. In the same period has been placed a really remarkable bowl, finely carved in black lacquer on a dull red back-ground. Towards the end of the Ming Dynasty, the production of lacquer seems to have languished, but it re-appears, somewhat slowly perhaps, under the reigns of Kang-Hsi and Yung-Cheng. The great revival and enthusiasm for lacquer objects however, both arose and reached its highest point during the reign of the emperor Kien-Lung although doubtless the imperial predilection for it added a considerable stimulus, and it is on record that the emperor had numberless lacquer objects made for his palace from the large twelve-fold screen down to the smallest box. We have several splendid imperial specimens in the present collection, all fully marked, including among them a fine oblong box of beautiful soft green lacquer, the whole surface of both box and cover being brilliantly carved with kyllen among waves. As this epoch was undoubtedly the most prolific, it may not perhaps be altogether without interest to briefly point out the chief "motifs" of decoration employed. Many of the larger vases have very finely carved figure and landscape panels (varying in number from two to six) divided from each other by conventional scroll foliage. Around the neck are very often four panels, each carved in high relief with one of the "Flowers of the Four Seasons"-the wild plum, of winter; the tree peony, of

spring; the lotus, of summer; and the chrysanthemum, of autumn. One may again find vases having one continuous landscape panel all round the body. Most of the figure panels represent scenes in the life of one of the numerous saints, but these are, in almost every case, impossible to identify as the particular symbol of each saint is too often omitted. Of these types of vases we have several important pairs in superb condition, and which illustrate these and other varieties of decoration very suitably. Of boxes, both large and small, there is an excellent and representative collection in the present exhibition, and it is noticeable that whether the box be square, round, or oblong, the decoration seems to proceed on somewhat similar lines, viz, a figure and landscape panel on the top of the lid, the rest both of the lid and the body of the box being often delicately diapered. Among other symbols, the "Eight Buddhist Emblems of Good Luck" are sometimes found carved in high relief at equal distances on a diapered ground work. Another interesting form of decoration sometimes found on the smaller boxes is the swastika, small representations of which cover the whole ground (exclusive of the top of the lid) almost like a diaper work. A special note should be made of two pairs of extremely handsome oblong carved red lacquer jardinieres, each fitted with a jade tree. These are now becoming rare, and much sought after, and, in as good a condition as these specimens, are difficult to obtain. The famous three-colour and two-colour carved lacquers are also well represented. The finest specimen of the three-colour variety being an imperial box for containing books which is quite a master-piece both as to quality of lacquer and brilliance of design and careful workmanship. In

the two-colour section, a large pair of circular boxes in green and red lacquer, and of extraordinary design and technique easily command the first place. We would also draw special attention to a remarkable twelve-fold black lacquer screen about 9 feet high of quite unexampled brilliance. Each panel represents a different subject, principally scenes of court life with numerous figures both mounted and on foot. On the back is a long inscription, deeply incised and gilt, which records that the screen was presented to a Lady Chio on her fiftieth birthday, the opening lines of the inscription being as follows:- "It is said riches and honour are always found in a capital, and if one has enough wealth to make a show they will be honoured with a title which will make the name famous, but as to Lady Chio it is a natural and good reason." After this follows a eulogy of the lady and the good influence she had over her son (who had evidently risen to high rank at an early age) and the inscription ends in a typically oriental phrase "Her virtue will shine as the moon for ever in the fame of her family." This wonderful screen must be seen to be fully appreciated.

OLD CANTON ENAMEL

Owing to the appreciation which was shown last year at our Exhibition of the above enamel, we are having on view in the same exhibit as the lacquer some recent purchases of choice specimens in this series, detailed particulars of a few of which are given below.

A remarkable Plate of very early period for enamel, probably Kang Hsi, and of unusual weight. In the centre is a panel reserved in white, and painted with a reddish fruit with dull green leaves, and enclosed by a broad border in rich soft tones of blue, green, mauve and yellow with dragons among clouds.

A small choice Vase of flattened inverted pear-shape, with a delicate grey-blue ground, on which is painted in a conventional angular and scroll manner a "Tao-tieh" dragon's head. On the base is the imperial mark.

A pair of Bowls, richly painted in the European taste with scenes from the life of the Virgin including the Annunciation. Very rare and fine.

A shaped Tray, superbly decorated, with flowers and butterflies in the highest possible manner.

A large Table Screen, richly painted in exquisite colours with the Eight Chinese Immortals in a landscape. One of the finest pieces that has ever passed through our hands.

Although the above mentioned specimens, (and others which we shall have on view at the same time) consist of the finest, and for this reason the most expensive pieces, we should like to make it clear that our large stock of this enamel (probably the largest in Europe) contains numerous small trays etc., eminently suitable for presents, and which can be purchased for quite a small amount

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Our large stock of Chinese and Japanese works of art include some very choice specimens of Jade, Crystal, Bronze, and Ivory, all, or any of which we shall be only too pleased to show to those whose taste does not lie in the direction of the two series with which this pamphlet deals.

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